

Seeing Blue

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Summary: My original Spartan-III characters find themselves in a desperate situation...

Seeing Blue

Science and Technical Facility

Outskirts of Alsha City

Tribute, Eridanus System

July 6, 2552

Spartan A-118, Michael, glanced up as a technician walked up to him. "Lieutenant Commander? Sir, you have a telephone call waiting for you at the security desk, sir."

Michael looked at the technician, confused by the man's message. Who would call him on a telephone? UNSC command would just use the standard scrambled radio link built into his armor, and his own team-mates were either in the building here or just minutes away at the reactor facility, touring it to improve the security accommodations. Nodding to the technician, he moved quickly down the hall, a subsonic impact from the weight of his body and equipment and the subtle rasp of armor the only sound he made. Reaching the telephone, he doffed his helmet and picked up the receiver. "This is A-118, go ahead."

There was silence at the other end, and then a deep, soft voice spoke. "Commander," it said, the voice filled with pain and horror, a voice Michael had heard only once before.

Michael's eyes widened and his face paled even further. "I'll be there in three minutes, Robbie. Stand fast, Spartan." The line clicked off, and Michael stood stock-still for a long moment. The last time Robbie had spoken aloud; Kayley had been grievously wounded

and trapped behind enemy lines. Michael had gone after her then, too. It was one of the reasons he was still a Lieutenant Commander, and would probably remain there. It had been worth it, too.

His mind was whirling, and he felt physically sick to his stomach as he imagined the millions of things that could happen in a nuclear reactor to incapacitate a Spartan. A reactor meltdown, live steam, a generator coil explosion, any one could kill or maim a Spartan instantly. Michael thought of Kayley, cold and gray and lifeless, and he felt as though his heart had been ripped from his chest. He swayed, and gripped the security desk so hard he left finger-dents in the stainless steel.

"Commander? Sir, are you all right? Should I send for a medic, sir?" A worried voice broke through the haze surrounding Michael, and he jerked his head up. Now was not the time to be paralyzed by fear and uncertainty, any more than on the battlefield. He took a deep breath and felt something in him shift; his mind became metallic and perfectly clear, hard logic taking over for emotion.

Turning, he saw the Security Marine, an older man with a bionic leg, looking at him with concern. Ordinary men frequently didn't know what to do around Spartans, but this man, who could have taken a medical discharge anywhere he wanted within the UNSC, was standing on a steel leg, hand out, offering to help another soldier, regardless of their differences. Michael felt a tremendous surge of pride, and shook his head. "No, sergeant, I'm all right. Is there a Warthog out front?"

The sergeant turned and looked. "Sure enough, Commander; it looks like it's been assigned to the post commander though. I can have a replacement brought up before he notices, but be careful, sir." He turned and moved behind his desk, already calling his motor pool. Michael nodded gratefully and strode out of the building, heading for the 'Hog. He swung into the driver's seat and hit the ignition button, and was off with a roar before the second lieutenant who was supposed to be watching the vehicle could do much more than squeak in protest.

Michael kept the throttle wide open, blasting down the roads as fast as he could. He had to get to Robbie and Kayley as fast as he could, safety restrictions on speed be damned. He rounded the final corner to the reactor complex, and was forced to slam on the brakes, sliding to a halt before the security gates at the mouth of the facility. A private security officer with a bored expression walked up the 'Hog, and held out a hand. "Gimme your ID, soldier, and hurry it up, there's some kinda drill or something going on up there at the 'plant, so I ain't got the time to be playing about."

Keeping a grip on his temper, Michael coldly handed over his ID card, staring hard at the man. Even through the expressionless gold visor (or perhaps because of it), the weight of Michael's gaze seemed to unsettle the gate guard, and it took him two attempts to swipe the ID through the reader in his other hand, and when it did, his face turned gray. With a shaking hand, he handed the ID back to Michael and turned, frantically waving at his men to get the gate open. Last obstacle removed, Michael slammed the throttle open and raced to the center building.

As he closed the distance, he became aware of several things- first,

the lights on the building, supposed to be green to assist with night vision, were low-powered, low pressure sodium lights, indicating a power outage. Second, the neighborhood just visible over the wall was completely dark, receiving no power from the station. Third, the Geiger counter installed in his HAZOP armor began to click, indicating elevated radiation levels. Fourth, and most frightening, the dome covering the main reactor was bulged and distorted. Anything that could distort five hundred tons of titanium was a very bad day in the making.

Michael vaulted out of the Warthog and ran to the main door, shouldering aside the startled security guard with a brisk "ONI." He locked onto Robbie's beacon, and soon found himself in the control room. Robbie stood to the side, poring over a map of the facility. Three technicians were scrabbling over controls, looking frightened and worried, and one other man, a fat individual with sweat staining his white uniform. The fat man looked up, then looked away again, apparently disinterested in everything.

Michael walked up to Robbie, pulled off his helmet, and reached out, patting the huge armored figure on the shoulder. Robbie looked up, and began signing, elegant, succinct hand gestures that expressed everything Michael needed to know. _Commander, Kayley was on a tour of the cooling systems in the basement when something went wrong with the reactor. The technicians are doing all they can, but they cannot control the radiation. Its level five, sir, and rising._ Robbie's hands shook, and he signed again. _We have to_ _find her, sir, we have to find Kayley, and soon._

Michael nodded gravely. He was in complete control now, cool and detached, ready for anything that might happen now. "All right, Robbie, calm down and stand fast. We're going to go in after Kayley and extract her. How long since the incident?"

Robbie looked up at Michael, locking gazes with Michael's cool green eyes, so similar to Kayley's, and took a deep breath, visibly steadying himself. _The incident began approximately twelve minutes ago. We lost contact with Kayley eight minutes ago; with the lights out, she said something about "getting turned around". Commander, she was directly under the containment vessel when the reactor destabilized._

Michael nodded. If the reactor's nuclear pile had destabilized badly enough, and if the emergency coolant flush hadn't gone perfect, the coolant would have flashed to steam and blown the top off the containment vessel; that would explain the bulge in the roof and the external radiation. It was the worst possible result- with no coolant and the vessel's integrity compromised, there would be no way to cool the core, and they would simply have to let it burn all the way down to the granite bedrock and entomb it there. If Kayley had been under the core, she would be in the hottest, filthiest environment imaginable, and would have bare minutes to survive, even wearing MJOLNIR armor.

Memorizing the map quickly, Michael sealed his helmet onto his collar and looked up at Robbie. Opening the team TACCOM, and dialing the power down to inhibit anyone listening in. "All right, Robbie, drop anything that's volatile. Ammunition, electronics, C-12, the works. Next, go grab every emergency decontamination package you can find and take them to bulkhead AA-12; then get back here as fast as you

can, go."

Robbie drew himself up and saluted, bolting off for the supplies Michael had requested. Michael himself turned to the frantic technicians. They were shooting each other worried looks, but their hands were dancing over the controls anyway, doing the best they could without their chief physicist. "Gentlemen, who is the senior technician on duty tonight?"

One man, a little older than the others, turned slightly. "That's me, sir." He kept an eye on the board he was working on, and Michael could see the technician was deeply scared. "My name is Roald, sir, Marcus Roald, technician first class. We're doing what we can for the reactor, but the coolant systems are gone. We're focusing on containment now, sir." His voice lowered, and he glanced over at the fat man staring blankly at the wall. "We can't call this in without his authorization code, sir, and we really desperately need help. If we don't get this contained, the entire city could well be contaminated."

Michael nodded once. "You'll get your help, technician Roald. I'm taking Spartan A-101 and we're going after Spartan A-048. You do everything you can, anything you can, on my authority under Office of Naval Intelligence's purview. Pull out all the stops, if you have to, but keep the city safe. Call in anyone you have to, understood?"

The technician nodded, and some of the fear drained from his face. "You be damned careful sir, the environment in there is hotter than Hell. God go with you." He turned and walked to the back of the room, pulling a special red phone from the wall and speaking into it.

Michael glanced up, and saw Robbie coming back. He had two thick bundles of rope slung over his shoulder, and a grimly determined set to his shoulders. Michael nodded, and stacked his own small stash of weaponry in a locker room adjacent to the control room; evidently as a break room area for the technicians. An M6, can of C-12 foaming explosives and detonators, and his ammunition all went into an empty locker, and Michael sealed it. Turning and moving out of the room, he joined Robbie.

The two Spartans walked down the corridor, each man preparing himself for the nuclear hell waiting for them just beyond the heavily shielded bulkhead hatch at the end of the corridor. Already the temperature is rising, and Michael's Geiger counter is beginning to click more and more rapidly. Michael flips the counter over to a color-coded system; the clicks would quickly become deafening inside the reactor building. Now the Geiger would register from green (safe for unprotected Humans) all the way up to triple red (instantly lethal).

The bulkhead doors loomed and Michael took a deep breath before tugging it open. As he hauled on the heavy steel, the Geiger flared to bright orange, and Michael had a sudden, horrifying image of a radiation-seared corpse with soft red hair turned brittle by harsh neutrinos. He clamped down hard on the emotions that threatened to escape him and stepped up, entering the facility proper.

The lights were out, either sidelined by lack of power or by the harsh radiation. Blue flickers began to lick up his armor, and his

shields whined and distorted around him as they fought to hold the radiation at bay. At this rate, the shields would be off-line in about fifteen minutes, and the armor would have to take the brunt of the nuclear assault unassisted. Activating his low-light amplification system, Michael saw that the walls, once painted a bright white to show even the smallest leak of coolant or debris instantly were burned and scorched, the paint peeling off.

Michael carefully walked to the edge of the catwalk and looked down. Ten stories below, a soft blue glow emanated, diffused by billowing, acrid smoke that was slowly filling the reactor room. In the center was a smooth titanium face, curved and seamless, the outer wall of the reactor. Looking up, Michael saw the glossy dome over the reactor was blasted and scarred- the reactor had literally blown its top, and only the incredible structural integrity of the building- designed to act as a safeguard against Insurrectionist activity- had prevented the roof from disintegrating and spreading the contents of the reactor all over the city at large.

Michael glanced over at Robbie, and pointed down. The two Spartans began to descend, clambering over debris and twisted steel on the way down, and Michael continually checked his mission clock and his Geiger reading. He could withstand over an hour in this environment, his HAZOP armor hardened to radiation even more so than MJOLNIR armor like Kayley's Air Assault or Robbie's CQC variants. They would only be able to withstand this area for thirty minutes- if they were lucky. And Kayley had been isolated and alone in here for fifteen minutes already; they had to find Kayley and get back out again in fifteen minutes or less.

The trip down was a trip into hell. Not even MJOLNIR armor could keep Michael cool, now. Radiation drained his shields, and the heat began to make his eyes sting with the sweat. He longed to pull his helmet off and swab his face, but a glance at the Geiger told of the stupidity of that action- it was firmly pegged into quadruple-red; instantly lethal to an unprotected Human. A glance at Robbie told the story there as well; Robbie was soldiering on fearlessly, as he always had, but his armor, painted pristine white, was blackening at the edges, and his movements weren't anywhere as fluid as they should be- he was feeling the heat, and feeling it bad. "Hang in there, Robbie. We're almost to the bottom; as soon as we're there, we find Kayley and we're out, all right?" Michael was surprised at his own voice- it was hard, mechanical, and even, the voice of a machine.

Robbie looked up, and he flashed a thumbs-up. Even here, in the belly of Hell, that even, hard voice was the voice Robbie trusted. It told him that Michael knew the danger, and he was putting the mission first. Michael had led his team into war more than once, and Michael's iron-hard voice had carried them through anything, even the most insane of odds.

The blue glow got more and more intense, and Michael's HUD began to flicker- even his hardened systems were showing the strain of the extreme environment. They were only a few hundred feet from Kayley's last known position, but in the smoky, blue-lit twilight, among all the wreckage of a destroyed reactor, finding one tiny Human was going to be a tall order. Especially, he thought, glancing at the mission clock, with just eight minutes to Kayley's thirty minute mark. They would have to be both lucky and very fast to get this done.

Michael thought hard. With Robbie down here, he could split the two of them up and cover twice the area, but that would mean risking being alone in the dark with a rampant core somewhere close. Michael had already suspended his own survival- his life belonged to his team, both as a responsible leader and as a person- but he didn't want Robbie to die on a fool's errand, either. No, they would search together, and if they hadn't found Kayley by the time his own armor began to fail, they would have to write her off- the grim calculus of command.

Turning slightly, he signed his orders to Robbie, and the two men began their search. For three desperate minutes, nothing, not a single blessed clue that any Human had ever been there, much less Kayley. Finally, though, Michael froze as light from his chest-mounted LED light illuminated a charred pink gauntlet. His heart frozen in his chest, Michael yanked the piece of sheet steel away, and there she was. Kayley must have fallen from a catwalk, he thought, reconstructing the events in his head. When she had fallen, she had been knocked unconscious, and the radiation had kept her down.

Michael knelt and quickly checked Kayley over, activating his radio at the same time. The channel, boosted to full power and heavily shielded, squealed and moaned, static distorting everything. "Robbie!" Michael shouted. "She's here! I've found her, Robbie!" Michael ran his hands down Kayley's flanks, checking for broken bones or foreign objects piercing her armor, and found none. He saw Kayley twitch, and his heart leapt into his throat- she was alive! Slipping a hand underneath her head to support her spine, he lifted Kayley and cradled her close to him as Robbie appeared from the gloom.

Kayley stirred again, her movements slow and uncoordinated. Her hand reached up, and Robbie instinctively grasped it, squeezing hard. With a scratch and squeal of static, her radio channel opened and her voice crept through, soft and feathery, as though Kayley were a long distance off instead of just inches away. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorryâ€¦ I'm sorryâ€¦"

Michael leaned forward and touched his visor to hers- in addition to the radio transmission; the contact would transmit the vibrations of his voice. Cradling her tightly, he spoke: "Kayley, it's okay, I've got you. I've got you, and Robbie's going to help me get you out of here, you understand?"

Kayley began to shiver almost imperceptibly, and Michael felt his control fracturing. "I'm sorry that I killed himâ€¦ he can't hurt you anymore nowâ€¦ I helped you, mommyâ€¦ Please don't make that faceâ€¦." Kayley collapsed, and Michael was peripherally aware of her breathing- slow and shallow, almost dead. Michael looked up, and he could see Robbie shaking- he was openly weeping, concealed only by his armor.

Slamming the door on his own emotions, Michael stared hard at him. "Spartan! There's no time for that now. Move out to the open, and rig up a sling. We'll lift Kayley out using the rope system."

Robbie remained crouched, one hand gripping Kayley's hand, the other pushing at Kayley's chest, as though trying to wake her up. Michael's heart wrenched, but he couldn't stop to consider personal feelings

now- the mission had to be accomplished. He pivoted and lashed out, kicking Robbie solidly in the chest. Robbie went over backwards, and came up, boiling with anger. Michael filled his voice with every ounce of authority he could muster, and barked at Robbie. "_Spartan Alpha one zero one, get on your feet and carry out your orders, NOW!"_

Robbie jerked as though electrocuted, and was ten feet away before he even realized what had happened. Michael bowed his head, touching his helmet to Kayley's once more. His voice still iron-hard and filled with his commander's authority, he spoke to her. "Kayley, don't you _dare_ die, goddamn it!" He lifted her, his armor and advanced musculature allowing him to heft her thousand pounds without difficulty, and he carefully picked his way out to where Robbie was constructing a sling. Robbie turned without a word and began to help load Kayley into the sling. Within seconds she was lashed in tight, and ready to be lifted out. "All right, Robbie. I'll start lifting her out; you climb like all the demons of Hell were on your six and get you both decontaminated and to a medic as fast as you can. I'll be along shortly." Robbie nodded and sprinted for the catwalks that had brought them down; he only had minutes of meaningful protection left himself.

Michael saw Kayley's arms move again, and her incoherent apologies slipped through her radio and into his ears once more. Pausing for an instant, Michael pressed his visor to hers once more. "Hush, Kayley. I'm going to get you home." Kayley sagged back in the harness, and Michael grabbed up the line. Taking a deep breath, his hand strayed to his throat. A tiny silver crucifix was there, buried under layers of shielding, armor, and Kevlar, and he offered a short, devoutly heartfelt prayer: "Lord, grant me strength." Gripping the line tightly and circling it around his body, Michael began to haul. Kayley's body rose and Michael pulled as hard and as fast as he could- seconds mattered now, more than ever, and the only sound in his helmet was the harsh rasp of his breath as he strained with everything he had, his muscles and tendons howling in protest.

Finally, Kayley reached the top, and Michael pulled the line taut against his back- in MJOLNIR armor, his weight advantage was negligible, and a single slip without a backup belay would send Kayley plummeting ten stories to the Reactor Room floor. As he stood, feet braced and straining, a pair of scorched white-armored arms reached out and snagged Kayley, and the rope went slack; Robbie had her. Michael dropped the line and began to climb, clambering up as fast as his overheated, exhausted body could carry him. Halfway up, he became aware of a metallic, copper taste in his mouth, and swore viciously. "Screw it," he whispered to himself- the radiation would either kill him or he'd escape from this hell.

Finally, Bulkhead Hatch AA-12 hove into view. Michael staggered up, slumping against the hatch, and punched in the override code. He slipped through and pressed the door shut once more, breathing heavily. Looking up, he saw that Robbie had already gotten Kayley and himself cleaned up and evacuated, but there was still a pair of empty decontamination tents, and Michael availed himself to both. The greasy fluid purged the residual radioactivity from his armor; stepping out, Michael quickly went into the locker room and recovered his weaponry.

Stepping into the control room, Michael was satisfied to see a whole plethora of ONI and UNSC Crisis Control uniforms moving about. Technician Roald was standing in the center of the room next to an ONI physicist, and the two were giving orders to contain the reactor. Michael looked over and gave the technician a thumbs-up, which he returned. He walked out to the Warthog he had left earlier, now joined by dozens of emergency vehicles and military transports, climbed aboard, and drove off, heading for the Alsha City Veteran's Affairs Hospital. He had to check in on Robbie, and get Dechan, Thomas, and Roy filled in on the situation.

Alsha City Veteran's Affairs Hospital

Alsha City

Tribute, Eridanus System

July 6, 2552

Michael stood, helmet in hand, as the Navy doctor walked out of the trauma center. He looked tired and haggard, and Michael privately sympathized. He didn't show it, but inside he was tired, and sick, and in serious pain from the pulled muscles and slipped disk in his back.

The doctor paused and looked up at the big Spartan, flanked on either side by all his brothers. With a worn smile, he nodded to the Spartans. "Your team-mate will live, Commander. She's unconscious, and will be for several hours, if I have anything to say about it, but you can take turns visiting."

Michael smiled tightly and thanked the doctor, who was in turn mobbed by the rest of the team. Michael reached out and caught Robbie's elbow; Robbie turned and Michael could sense the seething anger in him. "I want you to go talk to her first, Robbie, and I'm sorry."

Robbie stared hard at Michael, and slowly held out a hand. Michael shook it, smiled briefly, and let Robbie go, to reassure himself that the woman who meant so much to his tragic world was safe and well cared for. Michael himself moved off from the rest of his jubilant team, found a linen closet, locked the door, and sank to the floor. His breathing became harsh and ragged, and he dissolved into violent, racking sobs. Seeing Kayley limp on the floor like that, apologizing over and over, had nearly broken him; now that his Spartans, the woman that he loved and the men who had become like his children were safe, he finally surrendered his control, and wept broken hearted in the dark.

Alsha City Veteran's Affairs Hospital

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Kayley groaned quietly as she came to. Her head was splitting, and her mouth tasted absolutely foul; she lay still for a minute, trying to piece together where she was and what had happened. The pressure

on her finger and the steady beeping from the heart monitor next to her told her that she was in a hospital, and the faint taste ofâ€|_copper_, yes, that was it, the faint taste of copper in her mouth brought her ordeal in the reactor complex back to her in abrupt and terrifying detail.

She roused herself, looking about blearily, and wondered where Michael was. She sat up, and wriggled her fingers and toes, wincing as pins and needles sensations assaulted her. She rolled her head in a circle, verifying for herself that she was definitely alive.

She stopped dead as she opened her eyes and locked her gaze on a figure clad in green armor, dark hair cut short, and a strong Irish face fast asleep- the sleeping face of her Commander. "Michaelâ€|" she whispered, and covered her mouth with her right hand, her left weighted down by a quintet of IV cannulas, to stifle the gasp that had escaped. Her heart thudded against her chest, changing the steady beat of the monitor. She was overwhelmed by the sight of him; he had come for her, he had saved her, and tears burned in her eyes. Kayley blinked, allowing them to overrun her lashes as she wept, being as quiet as she could manage, not wanting t wake her sleeping knight.

End
file.